GOSPEL AND CULTURE IN THE '80's

Muskingum College Convocation

Wednesday, March 12 10:20 a.m.

I am very pleased to ~~have been invited to be the Beacon of Life lecturer for 1980 at Muskingum College~~ be here. I am more than pleased to be in the company of recent resident lecturers, Elton Trueblood, John Gerstner, John Bodo. Those are names and minds that command the attention of a wide reading public - including mine! I sincerely hope that our time together will be valuable and I am grateful for the privilege of sharing in the life of this campus for several days. I understand that to be part of the purpose of the lectureship and I want to be available to you between the formal presentations in any way that will be helpful to you.

I have chosen for a general topic "Gospel for a New Age" which seemed as safely ambiguous as I could make it. ~~And so - Gospel for a New Age~~

For starters, What is the new age? Who said one just started anyway? For you, I would submit the 80's are the new age. ~~The~~ ~~decade you will forever associate with your graduation from college and beginning of a career. It will be a formative time for you - as the sixties were and are for me.~~ We are, of course, a composite of many influences and forces. Some of them go back to infancy: in fact, those are the ones that get all the attention. I am concluding, however, that there is another very formative time in life, a time very pregnant in terms of its potential and that is the time represented by graduation from college, graduate

I am pleased because of affection for Muskingum - I have 2 daughters in social schools (both of which work long & convoluted letter last week answering twitter messages) ... and I recall a very pleasant time at Bible - 2 yrs ago - great privilege to get acquainted w/ Rel + Phil dept. Last note - I am pleased to be here ..

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just

or professional school and/or first job, and the process of tentatively finding a comfortable spot in American culture. I know now that events happening in the broader culture at that point in my experience were very influential in terms of who I became. The names, for me, were Civil Rights, Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Vietnam, MyLai, Sgt. Calley, Robert F. Kennedy. God save you from a litany like that one - but for you, years with powerful formative potential are ahead. Years that bear thinking about, that is to say.

And so, Gospel for a New Age ...

The decade happens just to have changed and that event seems inexorably to invite the latent seer in all of us to come out of hiding. Anyone who is anyone and a good many who are not, have had something to say about the 80's. In fact, there seems to be a consensus among those who think seriously about the human condition that we are launching into a very important period for American, and indeed, western civilization. It is, apparently a time not unlike the years immediately prior to the Civil War when thoughtful men stood on tip toe, as it were, watching for what would happen next. Carl Sandburg wrote about those years that something was dying, and something was being born and nothing would ever be the same. That seems to be the case for the 1980's

In the highly sophisticated opinion of Futurist Magazine, for instance, "the 1980's may turn out to be a decade when many important trends change direction. The world seems to be entering a phase in which some key trends have lost their

force and the structure of many institutional arrangements has been seriously undermined." (The Futurist, February 1980) The trends and institutions are economic growth, dominant American military and economic power, and of course, the revolution now occurring in the world of Islam which happens, by the way, also to be the world of petroleum.

Over against a culture which is, by anybody's guess, about to do some substantial changing, is a Gospel which among other things, claims that while all else around it may be evolving, it remains the same. It is about the eternal God, his will for his creation, his self disclosure in a Jewish Carpenter some of us know as his Son, his continuing love and care in and through the forces of human history! — that doesn't change. "...though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea: though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its turmult, God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved." (Psalm 46)

Yet, in every age, there are particular challenges, ideologies, political movements, philosophies sublime and ridiculous, which confront the Gospel of Jesus Christ with strength and conviction. St. Paul called them "Principalities + Powers" ~~Powers and Principalities~~", and when the Gospel retreats from them, wrapping itself in protective skirts of traditionalism, answering questions posed by laser technology with theological codes formulated at a council of Bishops in the fourth century - something will be discarded on the scrap heap of obsolete human dreams and ideas and it won't be the laser technology.

The Gospel must respond to, contend with and have dialogue openly, intelligently and courageously with the Principalities and Powers of this world: not simply because its existence is at stake - which it always is - but more importantly because God cares a lot about this world and Jesus Christ came to redeem it and the job of Christian people ~~to have something to do with living in it~~ is not to hide or withdraw from it - but to live in whatever world there is with confidence, faith & great joy.

My reading, my experience, my faith - lead me to identify ~~three~~ 4 Principalities - ~~three~~ challenges which I think will continue to emerge in our culture in the 1980's and to which people of Jesus Christ are called to respond. They are:

1. Technology ~~and the question of God~~.
2. Pluralism (~~Religious~~).
3. ~~Power~~ The Crisis of power
4. ~~The Narcissist Binge~~. Narcissism (our obsession with ourselves)

I will deal with the last 2 in this presentation tomorrow

I will be talking about ~~all three throughout my time~~ with you and sometime tomorrow will add a fourth - the Crisis of Power - not because it stands alone but because there is no way I'll have time to get it in the time perimeters which were part of my marching orders. Finally, my hope is that having raised some questions and untied a few strings - we might begin the process of wrapping something up with a little discourse on happiness - tomorrow afternoon.

People used to pray for rain - today we build a dam to irrigate

The first crisis then has to do, I believe, with the fundamental question: the matter of God himself. It is realted to technology. There is a sense in which high technology has called the existence of God into question for many people. For others, the apparent failure of technology to resolve the vital problems of our civilization has raised the same question the failure of human systems always seem to raise, "Is there a God in charge of this mess?"

GOD AND TECHNOLOGY - or

(The crisis in technology and the problem of God) - or

(Technolatry and another death of God)

Muskingum College
Wednesday afternoon - March 12, 1980

Modern human beings, says Henri Nouwen up at Yale, are realizing that their creative power holds the potential for self-destruction, that the jury is literally still out on whether our technology will save us before it kills us. A folk legend from ancient India tells it with uncanny accuracy:

"Four royal sons were questioning what specialty they should master. They said to one another, 'Let us search the earth and learn a special science.' So they decided, and after they had agreed on a place where they would meet again, the four brothers started off, each in a different direction. Time went by, and the brothers met again at the appointed meeting place, and they asked one another what they had learned. 'I have mastered a science,' said the first, 'which makes it possible for me, if I have nothing but a piece of bone of some creature, to create straightaway the flesh that goes with it.' 'I,' said the second, 'know how to grow that creature's skin and hair if there is flesh on its bones.' The third said, 'I am able to create its limbs if I have the flesh, the skin, and the hair,' 'And I,' concluded the fourth, 'know how to give life to that creature if its form is complete with limbs.'

"Thereupon the four brothers went into the jungle to find a piece of bone so that they could demonstrate their specialties. As fate would have it, the bone they found

was a lion's, but they did not know that and picked up the bone. One added flesh to the bone, the second grew hide and hair, the third completed it with matching limbs, and the fourth gave the lion life. Shaking its heavy mane, the ferocious beast arose with its menacing mouth, sharp teeth, and merciless claws and jumped on his creators. He killed them all and vanished contentedly into the jungle." (from: Tales of Ancient India, translated from the Sanskrit by J. A. B. van Buitenen (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), pp. 50-51.) (The Wounded Healer, Henri J. M. Nouwen, p. 5-6)

Sometime in the very near future the earth's supply of oil will be gone: not just dangerously low - but gone. The reason it will be gone is that our technology requires it: in fact, is addicted to it. Battelle Memorial Insittute sends its speakers all over Ohio with one message - to which we seem totally immune - "the oil is running out! We don't have much left! The people who have a lot don't want to sell it all to us, but even if they did, they'll run out shortly after we do!" I'm twenty years older than you and therefore, I may miss it. But the odds are very good that you'll be around for the day of reckoning - if we don't blow ourselves up trying to get a quick fix of juice by simply stealing it (curiously, the way addicts inevitably resolve their addiction for better or worse.)

And so we keep voting down mass transit levies, and reducing the service and serviceability of the 19th century relic we call a railroad system, and the legislative passes

a bond issue to fix up highways which makes as much sense at this point in time as establishing a graduate school for rain dancers to increase the productivity of Ohio corn fields.

Our technology may not save us. It may, in fact, kill us first. Gabriel Fackre, professor of theology at Andover Newton writes: "The list grows longer: from the silent violence accruing through the chemical wastes in our dumps and landfills, additives in our food, asbestos ceilings in our schools, radiation from our microwave ovens, color TV sets and luminous watch dials, to the more dramatic fire-fall of a structurally unsafe DC-10 and the unthinkable possibility of nuclear holocaust by engineering miscalculation or military calculation..." The major trajectory for the 1980's, for this thinker, is the fall of Skylab. Remember that? We weren't sure when it was coming down and were powerless to alter its course: held hostage for several days by our own technology. Fackre writes: "Here was one more technological misadventure to be added to the Three Mile Island peril that preceeded it and the biggest oil spill in history that followed it." (Agenda for the '80's, The Christian Ministry, January 1980)

There are a growing number of thinkers who conclude that the technological crisis we have made for ourselves has precipitated a theological crisis. A crisis very fundamental in nature. It has to do with the oldest riddle around. Is there a God? Is there a God related to this mess we are making of the world? Does his existence make any difference

at all? That, I believe, is the first, and fundamental crisis of the 1980's. The future will require a Faith in God that is intellectually tough, conversant with the science and technology of a new age - but not captive to it: a theology open to mystery and a dimension of knowing which is above and beyond physical science.

And I believe the Christian faith and Christian people must in the immediate future come to grips with the reality of [illegible].

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the vital problems of our civilization has raised the same question this failure of human systems always seems to raise: "Is there a God in charge of this mess?" Gabriel Fackre compares this time to 18th century Lisbon, when a mammothly destructive earthquake caused the skeptics, once again, to proclaim the death of God.

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So think with me, if you will, about the Question: the question of God. And think with me under three rubrics: God and Common Sense, God and Mystery, and God and Moral Imperative.

Years ago John Ruskin wrote, "The duty of the clergyman is to remind people, in an eloquent manner of the existence of God." (John Baillie, Our Knowledge of God, p. 240)

That used to be a little easier than it is today.

God is primary to the whole project. Yet, what was once assumed by all, is no longer as real, as firm as it used to be. Atheism, not the Madalyn Murray - verbal type, but what someone called recently the "quiet atheism of the heart" is not uncommon in some people all the time and, I believe, in all people some of the time. The more you think about God, the more opaque he becomes. Pascal was astonished at the boldness with which men propose to speak about God.

not academic atheism -

And so let us begin this presumptuous exercise. A good starting point is the understanding that there can be no "ought" in the matter of belief. John Oman taught that. "Truth," he said, "is not something we agree to reluctantly

but something that seizes us and compels our attention." I will never forget the situation in which I began to learn that difficult lesson. As a Divinity School Senior I had to be examined for ordination by my Presbytery. The meeting was in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania, a very small church in the mountains. I had come by train and car - to Snow Shoe from Chicago and my theological statement to the Presbytery reflected all the erudition which I could squeeze into several pages. It was quite a statement. Presbyteries can be gracious and forgiving and so I passed, but afterward one of the retired members of Presbytery put a fatherly arm around my shoulder, complimented me on my paper and said, "Young man - I've been a minister for forty-five years and you know what I believe in now, more than anything else?" I expected him to say something like "The Second Coming, or Heaven", but what he said was, "More than anything, I believe in integrity." That's what I remember about my ordination examination. I wasn't sure what he meant: I'm still not. But I'm still thinking about it. I think he was telling me that I was trying to believe too much. I think he meant that God doesn't make his love, or grace, or salvation, contingent upon our ability to believe things about him. I think he meant that God loves even the people who don't believe he exists. I think the retired gentleman wanted the new man to know that "ought" and "believe" never go together.

We have trouble learning that, and along the way we shut out or turn out many of our brothers and sisters. We have a way of becoming defensive and then arrogant in the face of questions, intellectual challenges to our faith. In the

recent issue of Outlook, William Phipps wrote, "Most Christians have been afflicted with pietists who conveniently squelch every difficult inquiry by sanctimoniously spouting, 'Who are we to question the word of God?'" I was saddened, frankly, by a paragraph from Chrales Darwin's autobiography I discovered recently - DArwin, whose Theory of Evolution is still attacked by some Christians. Darwin wrote that he was "very unwilling to give up his belief in Christianity - but disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, and was at last complete. I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so...the men who do not believe - and this includes my father, brother and almost all my best friends - will be everlastingly punished...This is a damnable doctrine." (see Leslie Weatherhead, The Christian Agnostic, p. 45) How sad that the conflict between theology and common sense couldn't have been creatively engaged in the church.

Faith in God does not have to be defensive. It certainly does not have to hide from the probing inquiries of human logic. God made the human mind too. Logic is his creation: common sense is one of his better inventions.

There is, I continue to believe, a case to be made for the reasonability of Christian faith; not the ultimate case, to be sure, but a strong and stimulating one nevertheless.

I believe that order and design in the universe leads logically to the conclusion that there is an orderer, a designer. It is an old argument. If you stumbled upon a

watch and examined all its springs and cogs and observed how it worked, you would not, on the basis of common sense, conclude that the watch happened as a result of an incredible series of physical accidents. You would conclude, rather, that there was a watchmaker somewhere. Biologist Edwin Conklin writes, "The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in the print shop." (Weatherhead, ibid. p. 87). A bright atheist would have a field day poking holes in it, I suppose, but I continue to conclude that it makes as much common sense to believe in creation by a creator than it does to believe in creation by accident.

I know only a very little about astronomy but simply looking at the stars makes a theist of me, even if I didn't want to be. I love the story of the crusty old Scots Highlander who after a grim sermon on election and predestination and eternal damnation, suggested that his preacher should spend some time studying the stars. "Why?" the minister asked. "Because you've an awful wee God. That's why," the wise Scotsman answered. (cite Dr. Wilkinson, Princeton - 100 billion galaxies)

I know that it doesn't prove a thing, but I find very provocative the idea that when you look at the stars, the very best you can do is see light which left its source in November of 1975, because that's how long it takes the light leaving the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, to get here, and that when you find ~~that~~ the reliable Pole Star what you are

looking at is light which has been traveling at the speed of 186,000 miles per second since the year 1514. ("When I look at the heavens, the moon and stars which thou has established...What is man that thou art mindful of him?") It doesn't prove a thing, but I ask that question every time I look.

Religion must not ever be irrational. When an idea or proposition strikes us as illogical, unreasonable we have the responsibility, I believe, at least to examine it very carefully before accepting it. There are, of course, limitations to human reason. Shubert Ogden, who is out on the cutting edge of contemporary theological inquiry acknowledges the validity of the scientific method as the criteria for truth, but argues that it is not logical to conclude that there is no truth outside the scope of the scientific method. A biologist, after all, can explain very precisely what happens when a young man and young woman are together without dealing at all with love. Mathematicians can and have charted the precise progressions in Bach's composition technique without touching the reality of the St. Matthew Passion. There is, very simply, truth that is larger than logic.

But faith in God, I believe, is not blind. It is not a matter of shutting off your intellectual capabilities, swallowing hard and accepting what your common sense tells you can't be so. Faith is going with common sense as far as you can: listening to your own intellectual capacities, examing all the evidence and then deciding - then making the commitment which takes you beyond the realm of reason and

logic, to the place of deeper truth. You do that, after all, when you contemplate the miracle of another person's love for you. You can't prove it. All you can do is weigh the evidence and then trust. ~~What a shame to miss the experience, however, in the process of trying to prove its reality.~~

It rests finally, therefore, not on logic but on testimony and all ~~the preacher~~ any of us can do, ultimately, is share his own. I measure mine by whatever common sense I have been given, and sometimes correct it or bring it in line, and sometimes expand it.

I believe the notion of God as intelligence, designer, as creator, and ~~lover~~ lover of his creation makes sense. Creation continues to astound me: from the remarkable capabilities of a single cell to the majesty of a mountain. I am astounded by human birth each time I am close to it. Tertullian, second century church father, said it - and I believe it because it makes sense to me: ("I will give you a rose and you will not doubt God any more.") I conclude, quite simply, that it makes more sense to believe in a creator than in coincidence.

I believe because Christianity, frankly, seems to me to make sense, in profound ways, often beyond the perimeters of my initial responses. I know the reality of power in the world. I also know that power as force does not work. It is not, therefore, rational. What works is love, humility, self emptying. We can argue about the details, the implications and ramifications, but the Roman Empire is gone, so is the thousand year Reich; the new Soviet Empire, even our own

I believe Xtianity compels attention of rational people because it's analysis of human condition and its ethical thrust make sense, to p13

II God and Mystery

Common Sense, human reason, do not threaten faith in God. And yet, they do not contain it either.

One of the significant curiosities of our time is that while we appear to be entirely rational, logical, skeptical people who have created a highly technological culture and sophisticated way of life. Superstitions have no place among us. On the other hand we dearly love movies like The Exorcist. The occult is big business, the most bizarre forms of witchcraft are experiencing a renaissance, millions of us consult astrology columns, and buy books on astrology, and we have made Jeanne Dixon into a celebrity, and Science Fiction is acknowledged to be serious literature. In religion, we are fascinated by Transcendental Meditation, Yoga and other mystical Eastern theologies and one of the more dynamic and perplexing phenomena in the Christian Church is the Charismatic movement; so named because its adherents become possessed by the Holy Spirit and exhibit mysterious behavior, like speaking in tongues.

There is something in us, it seems, that needs a dose of the supernatural: we will express that need in one way or

another, if not in our religion, then elsewhere. The phenomenon has certainly been around a long time. Biblical scholars are utterly fascinated with references to the supernatural, the mysterious, the divine manifesting itself in human experience: Moses and the burning bush, for instance, or on Mt. Sinai, covered with clouds, with lightning and thunder, a vivid experience of the reality of God; shepherds in the field outside Bethlehem hearing the angels; the disciples of Jesus experiencing his transfiguration; the conversion of Saul on the Damascus road. All of these experiences have been accompanied by mystery and fear on the part of the people who have witnessed them.

One time Jesus' disciples were fishing at night and had caught nothing. When he suggested they put into deeper water they encountered a shoal of fish and caught so many they almost capsized the boat. That phenomenon so affected Peter that he fell down on his knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter sensed something going on here beyond the normal human phenomenon. As he did throughout, Peter seems to have been sensitive to the holy, the divine in Jesus. And, frankly, it scared him to death. He didn't want to have anything to do with it. It was literally, "holy terror."

~~Every seminary student must read~~ The definitive study was written on the subject by a very scholarly German, Rudolph Otto, under the title, The Idea of the Holy. Otto called it the "Numen - or Numinous", the "Mysterium Tremendum" and observed: "The

feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption from the depths of the soul... It may become the hushed trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures." (Ibid., p. 12-13).

The testimony of history is that human beings sense, somewhere deep inside themselves, that which is greater: that which cannot be explained by the mind alone. In the face of the Holy, the "Mysterium Tremendum", or God, if you will, the response most common is awe, reverence, fear, dread, "holy terror". The experience is authentic and perhaps even very healthy. In fact something important about us gets lost when the experience is no longer available.

The trouble is that the culture in which we live, ~~on one level, tries to be altogether secular~~. We are, first of all, altogether too rational. Nurtured on the scientific method, we have concluded that if you can't weigh and measure it, it can't be true. Scientists, by the way, don't believe that. They deal with things like quarks, quasars, and black holes. They know, that is to say, about the unknown. It is the lay person who is persuaded to buy toothpaste because an actor in a white coat pulls a three ringed binder from the shelf and intones the sacred litany, "Laboratory tests show..."

British theologian J. S. Whale wrote: "The greatest danger we run is that we put a pipe in our mouth and our feet on the mantle and sit down in an armchair to discuss theories of atonement instead of bowing down before the wounds of Christ; that we scurry round the burning bush taking photographs from suitable angles instead of taking the shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is Holy Ground." (Christian Doctrine).

No one brought more intellectual muscle to bear on religion than Pascal. No one struggled harder. And he concluded: "If one subjects everything to reason our religion will lose its mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principle of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in." (Rudolf Otto, ob. cit., Preface to) I will argue for common sense in religion: for theology based on the very best thinking we can do. I believe that truth commends itself and that we should examine every idea with great care. I want also to suggest that we are required to balance intellect with emotion, what we know and can understand with the reality of what we don't know and can't understand. I want to argue that the wisest thing we can do is be open to awe, mystery, perhaps even a little fear. We do not, in fact, know it all. Lewis Thomas, President of the Memorial Sloane Kettering Cancer Center in New York has published an absolutely delightful collection of essays, "The Lives of a Cell", most of which make that point. In one of them he suggests that

we agree to suspend all further research into how best to destroy life until "we have acquired a complete set of information concerning at least one living thing." Then at least we will know what we are killing. He proposes a simple one, the protozoan, Myxotricha paradoxa which lives in the digestive tract of Australian termites. Dr. Thomas knows that we really don't know much at all! (p. 26)

In another essay Thomas pokes gentle fun at the presumptuousness of modern humankind. Nothing is so arrogant, and so wrong, he suggests, than the ecological warning that we are endangering life in the ecosystem. Life is durable, he suggests. Life will go on. We are the delicate part, the weak link. Human life is transient, vulnerable. Fear for the snail darter, that is to say, but reserve your holy terror for the fact that we are in the process of committing determined suicide ecologically.

At the same time the mystery - the sense of the holy people have always experienced in their religion is slowly being replaced by cozy cliches. One critic put it this way, "When each sermon becomes a children's sermon, the taste for spiritual junk food expands until faith is a lollipop and theology is a Twinkie." Instead of struggling with the real issues such as peace, survival, economic equality, modern Christians are out "encountering where it's at in group gropes, or getting drenched in Pentecostal downpours of the spirit. Whereas Peter cried out, 'Depart from me, O Lord', today we cry out, 'O God, you make me feel so good.'" (Theology Today, 1/80, p. 535, Religion by Cliche, Leonard Sweet)

I, for one, don't want to be so friendly and warm that I forget that I go to church to get in touch with none other than the Lord of Creation. American piety is not at all comfortable with the idea of a God mysterious enough to inspire awe. We talk piously about him walking in the garden with us, and talking with us, and telling us we are his own, whereas if the Bible is to be trusted he is also the high and holy one who is the sovereign Lord of all nations. Certainly he walks with us but he is also striding through the filthy streets of our slums demanding to know what we're doing about justice. In the place of Jahweh, whose name the Israelites were afraid to pronounce, American piety has substituted the "Man upstairs."

People have met the mysterious, and have felt awe or fear - in encounter with the limits of life: both birth and death, and again our culture tilts in an opposite direction. In every age before us, both birth and death happened naturally, at home, in full view and with much personal involvement on the part of other members of the family. Today both happen, in isolation, antiseptically, rarely at home, too frequently without any contact from other members of the family. It is quite possible to live all of life and never encounter personally, birth or death - except one's own. We are insulated against the holiness - the mystery inherent in both events. Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago theologian writes: "Any person who has witnessed the birth of a child has experienced the wonder, terror and ultimacy of that event...it is almost unavailable to modern

men." (Naming the Whirlwind, p. 318) Happily, that is changing. Yet, not long ago, hospitals relegated expectant husbands to small torture chambers called waiting rooms, full of cigarette smoke, plastic plants and three year old issues of Field and Stream - while the greatest, holiest, most awesome event in history was happening down the hall.

You cannot, I propose, witness the extremes - being born or dying - without the primal, religious experience that is elicited every time we stand at the edge of mystery. Our life, too often deprives us of it, and we need it.

3

People have experienced God in the past in the form of an absolute moral imperative. I wish to suggest that in our concern to moderate the theological extremism which believes that God loves to send people to hell, we have, in fact, come up with a God who doesn't seem to care at all about how we behave. People before us were afraid of what would happen to them if they misbehaved, and that was not always healthy. But the reverse, the total moral meutrality of current theology may be worse. It is not a very popular topic, but may I venture to suggest that we are accountable to a just and sovereign God, and that there is every reason to fear the consequences of violating his will. My, that sounds archaic, doesn't it?

Thomas Jefferson once remarked that he shuddered for his nation when he remembered that God was just: a prophetic comment, I would suggest. We paid dearly and are still paying dearly, I believe, for the historic evil of slavery.

We have paid dearly and are today paying dearly for supporting tyranny and oppression and torture in other nations. Iran is teaching us a lesson we do not want to learn and that is that we, along with every other nation, are ultimately accountable for our behavior. I believe that is reason for fear I believe when Peter encountered Jesus he was afraid because of overwhelming moral superiority. And I believe the idea that we are accountable to a sovereign God is viable and relevant and a matter of life and death today.

I believe we are accountable for violating, systematically and defiantly, the ecosystem - and that the law suits several states are filing against Ohio for dumping coal waste all over their farm land is only a small part of the cost. We, our children, and their children will pay. I believe we are paying and will pay for our infatuation with violence. We're hooked on it. We can't get enough of it. We have more guns in our bedroom drawers than anyone else in the world - and more violence, and more murder and we simply refuse to learn that it is related.

Religion might, it seems to me, venture a little old fashioned fear of God into the common life of the culture by suggesting that the Lord of Creation is just, and that he cares about peace, compassion, love - and that we are accountable for our behavior.

Life, it seems to me, may depend on our recovering the experience of mystery and the resultant Holy Terror. But the need essentially, is not external. We need the sense

of a transcendent God and the awe of the Holy which goes with it - in order to be fully human. Artists, poets, musicians, have always known that about us. ~~It is true~~, I believe, to confess it about ourselves. We never stand taller than when we are on our knees in prayer. We are never stronger than when we confess our need for God. We are never bigger than when we acknowledge that which is greater than we are.

Jesus Christ scared Peter to death. The good news is that when Peter, in Holy Terror, said, "Depart from me"; Jesus didn't depart. Rather he stayed, stuck it out with Peter through thick and thin. Peter's fear in the face of Christ was an important step in his growth as a man. He could come to grips with himself honestly only by acknowledging the great distance between Jesus and himself. He didn't get there with his arrogance or his presuming that he knew it all, or his physical strength. He opened his life to Jesus Christ in the very words "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man."

So our faith, it seems to me, is best, strongest and most full of possibility when it generates what can only be called Holy Terror - when we can hear the question posed in a very wise old spiritual -

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

and respond honestly -

"Sometimes it causes me to tremble."

Common sense, human reason do not threaten faith in God. And yet, they do not contain it either.

5 mi — if no time — go on to P 22

The second major challenge to Christian faith in the 1980's will, I believe, be pluralism: the dramatic ascendence of other, competing religions to a position of attention and centrality.

It has been coming for some time now. The fervor of the Nineteenth century missionary movement has waned. Two generations ago young men and women gave themselves to a glorious vision of converting the whole world to Christianity. ("The World for Christ in our generation." Off they went - to China, Africa, Indonesia; highly motivated, deeply committed.

It may have been one of the high moments in Christian history in terms of its ~~vision~~ vision and commitment.

Several things happened as a result. Christian churches were started and grew and thrive today on every continent: heroic, obedient, sometimes persecuted minority churches. The other thing that happened is that Christianity encountered other religions and in some cases, at least, experienced appreciation for insights offered by Buddhaism, [redacted], for instance. Thoughtful Christians began to see, thanks to other religions, how thoroughly the Gospel of Jesus Christ had become the captive of Western culture.

As the encounters increased and as the world grew smaller and smaller religious pluralism became a fact of life. Most of us first encountered it when in the middle of the Civil Rights movement we stumbled on a full blown religious institution in the Black Community we hadn't ever known

existed before: The Black Muslims. We were jarred when the heavyweight champion of the world, Cassius Clay, the Louisville Lip, converted, changed his name to Mohammed Ali, and after each victory in the ring insisted on giving Allah the credit.

The sudden reappearance of China in world attention underscored the fact that there are an awful lot of non-Christians out there, people with a culture, hopes, dreams, and religion, not exactly sitting around waiting for us to tell them our secrets.

But the event that documented the reality of pluralism more than any other happened as the decade of the 70's was winding down. Our friend, ~~ally~~ ally and bon vivant, the Shah, incredibly was deposed and another surprise confronted us, every bit as surprising as the Black muslims in the 60's; namely, the Shiites, and their enfuriating enigmatic leader the Ayatollah Khoumenie. Here were people, totally committed to another way of seeing things: powerful in their discipleship, frightening in their certainty, and utterly hostile to things western, including Christianity.

The religious future, I think, will continue to feel the impact. Gabriel Fackre writes: "A massive challenge to the finality of Christ is on its way as a result of the collective impact intercultural exchange, the sensed need for learning to live together in a volatile world, the good things perceived in other religions..." The author predicts that just as some theologians announced the death of God in

1967 - in the 1980's someone will announce that one can be a Buddhist and a Christian.(op. cit. p. 8)

In fact, in a pastoral situation, I've already had to face that one. A young man in my parish, a practicing Buddhist since a stint in the Peace Corps, and his wife, both of whom worship with us, requested baptism for their child. They regarded themselves as Christian Buddhists: I thought there was no way I could baptize their child. I was prepared to take that stand: after two long conferences I went ahead with it. I was convinced that they are what they say they are - Christian Buddhists.

Fackre refers to it as "plural shock and writes that it "will mean Christological heart failure for a good many in the 80's. It will not be an easy time to witness to the scandal of particularity." (op. cit., p. 9)

The immediate concern, I believe, will be relationship and dialogue with a newly vigorous and confident Islam. Part of trying to have dialogue will be, I believe, acknowledgement of the fact that much of the traditional language of Christianity is rooted in a Greek philosophic system which is no longer used, and which is totally alien to the world of Islam. The doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, is a major stumbling block to conversation. Islam, rigidly monotheistic, hears Christians talking about God the father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit - and counts 1, 2, 3 dieties. Muslims read the Nicene Creed to wit: "We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God...

God of God, Light of Lights, Very God of Very God..." We know or think we know, what that means. I know that the Fathers of the Constantinian Church, Greek philosopher scholars, who when they said "of one substance with the father" were using a concept familiar to all thinking people, - knew exactly what they meant. But, with the Nicene Creed in your hand, try to convince a bright Muslim that you don't believe in at least two, if not three separate gods.

The response to pluralism, can be, of course, an evangelical rennaisance, accompanied by a new theological imperialism. That is the crux. My hope is that we will be open: if Jesus Christ is the truth and the light, that we welcome him wherever we find truth and light: that we will be willing to reformulate our faith, even as that may mean loosing our grip on certainties which have served us well in the past.

Greek dualism -
2 realms
spirit/body dichotomy
immortality

Hebrew
Unity / Wholeness of humanity
No dichotomy - no evil body, good spirit

We have roots older than Greece

let's reformulate our faith - in Hebrew base -

nuclear guaranteed muscle - none of it is forever. None of it compels permanence. I believe in the reasonability of God and the Gospel because I know - as you do that it is true - that love is better than hate, kindness is better than cruelty, compassion is better than indifference, equality is better than discrimination, that the exceptions are the aberations, the sick people. I believe the Christian faith compels the attention of the rational mind because its ethic - its understanding of the human condition, makes sense.

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CONCLUSION - I

Conclusion

I believe in God because of Jesus Christ. He was, at least, the best we have ever produced. I believe more than that about him, but he was, at least, the best of us. Not to believe is to conclude that he was wrong, a fraud perhaps, mad perhaps, deluded perhaps, but utterly, dead wrong: that when he said there was a Kingdom coming like yeast in bread, he was wrong; that when he told the story about a father running down the road to meet a wayward son and let his hearers tie that up with God, he was wrong; that when he said, at the hour of death, ("Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,") he was talking to nothing.

I believe because, even if I didn't want to, the question keeps asking itself. I can't escape it. I know what Sigmund Freud said about our desire for a father and our capacity to create one, but understanding that doesn't resolve the question. I believe because I have felt what Rudolf Otto called the "~~Ma~~ Numinous" - the "Wholly Other", what Paul Tillich described as that moment he could accept the fact that he was accepted by something greater than

himself; ~~what a philosopher called the "pull of the invisible", and Scotsman George MacDonald called the "scent of Unseen reeve."~~ I believe because "the mind is alive"; to borrow words of a Frenchman, Henri DeLubac ("and so is the living God who makes himself known to it.") (Ogden, The Reality of God, preface.)

I have come to believe that the question itself is not evidence of psychological insecurity or neurotic obsession but the mysterious moving of God. I believe he has created the need within us. ("My soul thirsts for thee, my flesh thirsts for thee in a dry and thirsty land.") the Psalmist wrote.

I believe because we are restless until we find our rest in him. That is my testimony, remarkable only because it is mine. I invite you to discover yours; to measure it by your own gift of common sense.